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Teachers' Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Academic Acceleration

Christy L. Schwartz
schwartz7@marshall.edu

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Teachers' Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Academic Acceleration

Research Paper

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Professional Development in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Masters of

Arts

By

Christy L. Schwartz

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Abstract

Acceleration is one method of differentiating instruction for gifted students that has proven to have positive academic and social-emotional benefits. However, it is often underutilized by teachers and administrators either due to misinformation or lack of information. The purpose of this study was to determine the perceptions held by teachers regarding the effectiveness of acceleration as a service option for students who are gifted. Findings indicated that, although teachers appear to be well-informed about the benefits of acceleration on academic achievement and engagement, they appear to be misinformed about the social-emotional effects of acceleration. The majority of teachers indicated that students who are accelerated would not thrive socially. Additionally, they believed that not allowing students to accelerate when a need is identified would not cause social-emotional harm to students. Further research is needed to determine if the findings indicated here are generalizable to the larger population.

Keywords: acceleration, benefits, perceptions, social-emotional development, academic achievement, gifted education, differentiating instruction

Table of Contents

Abstract	2
Chapter One: Introduction	5
Statement of the Problem.....	6
Rationale for the Study	6
Purpose of the Study	7
Research Question	7
Operational Definitions.....	7
Chapter Two: Review of Literature	8
Diversity of Students and Learning Needs	8
Positive Academic and Social-Emotional Effects of Acceleration	10
Underutilization of Acceleration.....	14
Conclusion	17
Chapter Three: Procedures and Methods	19
Research Question	19
Operational Definitions.....	19
Setting and Participants.....	19
Procedures	20
Instruments.....	20
Threats to Validity	21

Chapter Four: Results	22
Demographic Information.....	22
Perceptions of the Effects of Acceleration on Academic Achievement.....	23
Perceptions of the Effects of Acceleration on Engagement.....	23
Perceptions of the Effects of Acceleration on Social/Emotional Development	24
Perceptions of Administrative Support for Acceleration	26
Additional Information	28
Chapter Five: Discussion	30
Interpretation and Implication of Results	30
Limitations	32
Further Research	33
Conclusion	33
Appendices.....	38

Teachers' Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Acceleration

Chapter One: Introduction

In its Pre-K-Grade 12 Gifted Programming Standards, the National Association for Gifted Children (2010) advised that instruction for gifted students should be designed to help them grow academically each year according to their abilities. The National Association for Gifted Children (NAGC) also urged educators to modify the standard curriculum in order to meet these students' demonstrated needs. Recommended modifications included offering content that is more complex than the regular material as well as providing students with instruction that is academically challenging for them. Additionally, educators of the gifted were advised to accelerate instruction to match their students' individual learning rates.

It appears that despite these recommendations, most gifted program offerings on the elementary, middle, and high school levels are still designed to teach all students the same curriculum at the same pace (Callahan, Moon, & Oh, 2014; Hertberg-Davis, Callahan, & Kyburg, 2006; Missett, Brunner, Callahan, Moon, & Azano, 2014). In addition to the lack of appropriate differentiation in the current gifted program offerings, students are frequently served in general education classrooms that proceed at a pace far below their demonstrated ability levels (Gross, 2006).

Research has demonstrated that teachers are frequently responsible for the lack of acceleration as a service option for their students who are gifted. Although teachers appear to be more educated about the benefits of acceleration than they were in the past, they still often fail to recommend it even when their students are performing academically at a year or more above their current grade level (Gross, 2006; Rambo & McCoach, 2012; Siegle, Wilson, & Little, 2013). This study will attempt to ascertain more about teachers' attitudes toward academic

acceleration and why they may fail to recommend it despite evidence that it is academically and socially beneficial as well as cost-effective.

Statement of the Problem

The majority of research over the last decade reveals that academic acceleration has positive effects on both academic achievement and social-emotional development for students who are identified as gifted (Rogers, 2015). Additionally, students who have demonstrated academic and social-emotional readiness to accelerate, but are not given the opportunity to do so, often languish academically and socially (Gross, 2006). Regardless of these findings, many gifted students are still not being provided with the opportunity to accelerate their education according to their individual needs (Callahan et al., 2014).

Rationale for the Study

In its 2012-2013 State of the Nation in Gifted Education report, the NAGC discovered that aside from outstanding advances in small geographical areas, the nation as a whole has not committed sufficient funding, policies, or manpower to support the education of students with advanced abilities. Only four states provide full funding for their gifted education initiatives, and 14 states do not provide any funding for gifted education services.

In addition to lack of funding, there is a lack of teacher education regarding best practices in serving students with gifts and talents. Only three states require professional development in gifted identification and service practices for general education teachers, and only 17 states require a professional credential for their teachers of gifted education.

Since Rambo and McCoach (2012) found that training in gifted education practices and perceived administrative support tended to increase teacher self-efficacy toward recommending acceleration, this documented lack of professional development may be influencing teachers

against recommending this service option for their students who are gifted. Additionally, Siegle, et al. (2013) found that although teacher attitudes toward acceleration were changing, behaviors were not. Teachers cited a belief that recommending acceleration would be met with resistance from administrators, parents, and other teachers as one reason why they chose not to do so. Given that teacher perceptions of effectiveness and collegial support have proven to be so important in influencing behavior toward recommending acceleration opportunities for gifted students, both studies indicated that more research is needed in this area.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this research is to determine the perceptions held by public school teachers in a suburban mid-Atlantic school district regarding the effectiveness of using academic acceleration as a service option for educating students who are identified as gifted.

Research Question

What perceptions are held by public school teachers regarding the effectiveness of using academic acceleration as a service option for educating students who are identified as gifted?

Operational Definitions

1. Academic acceleration will be defined as moving a student through a curriculum ahead of his or her age-level peers (Southern & Jones, 2015).
2. Perceptions will be defined as the beliefs and understandings of an individual given his or her education and experiences.

Chapter Two: Review of Literature

Concerns about meeting the needs of students who are gifted has led to many recent bodies of research. A review of the literature reveals three common threads. First, despite the diversity of gifted students and their learning needs, (Gross, 2006; Hertberg-Davis et al., 2006; Reis & Renzulli, 2009) most program offerings are “one-size-fits-all” (Callahan et al., 2014; Hertberg-Davis et al., 2006; Missett et al., 2014). Second, acceleration is one method of differentiating instruction for gifted students that has proven to have positive academic and social-emotional effects (Gross, 2006; Hoogeveen, van Hell, & Verhoeven, 2012; Kretschmann, Vock, & Lüdtke, 2014; Park, Lubinski, & Benbow, 2013; Preckel, Gotz, & Frenzel, 2010; Rogers, 2015). Third, although there are 20 different ways to provide acceleration to students, this service is often underutilized by teachers and administrators either due to misinformation or lack of information (Missett et al., 2014; Rambo & McCoach, 2012; Siegle et al., 2013). Each of these three themes has important implications for research on best practices to meet the needs of learners who are gifted.

Diversity of Students and Learning Needs

There is substantial disagreement on what constitutes giftedness which results in a variety of definitions being used to identify students and guide decisions about services. A majority of school districts, surveyed for a national report on gifted programs, use the definition adopted by their respective states. However, since only 90% of states surveyed provide gifted policies and guidance to their districts, many administrators and educators are left to their own devices to decide how to identify students and what services to provide. Most districts use an identification and service model that focuses on intellectual giftedness only, and they identify students with a combination of achievement and intelligence quotient (IQ) scores. (Callahan et al., 2014).

Despite the complexities of defining giftedness and the lack of agreement on a single federal or state definition, the idea persists that gifted students are a homogeneous group and that their gifts and talents are inherent traits that will persist regardless of education or circumstances. This idea is a misconception that is not supported by research. In fact, Reis and Renzulli (2009) pointed out that gifted individuals are represented across all cultures and economic conditions. Additionally, they may be extraordinarily gifted or talented in a variety of areas including creative pursuits, leadership abilities, or academic subjects. Further contradicting this notion is the reality that gifted students often underachieve due to lack of appropriate academic challenges and support, lack of motivation, the presence of a learning disability, or cultural and economic barriers.

Given the diversity of these learners and their needs, Missett et al. (2014) recommended that educators should assess the individual academic needs and readiness of gifted students to appropriately adjust the content and pace of instruction. However, that does not appear to be common practice in many classrooms. Most programs for gifted learners on the elementary, middle, and high school levels are designed to teach all students the same curriculum at the same pace (Callahan et al., 2014; Hertberg-Davis et al., 2006; Missett et al., 2014). The majority of elementary students are pulled out of their classrooms once per week to participate in part-time enrichment programs while middle school students are most often served in regular homogeneously grouped classes. Advanced Placement (AP), dual enrollment, and International Baccalaureate (IB) programs are the primary service options for high school gifted students. These programs were designed for all high school students, and due to time constraints or scheduling conflicts with other classes and extracurricular activities, they are not always a viable option for gifted learners (Callahan et al., 2014; Hertberg-Davis et al., 2006).

Positive Academic and Social-Emotional Effects of Acceleration

According to Southern and Jones (2015), there are 20 different types of acceleration practices which are utilized in elementary, middle, and high school classrooms. Of these, the types which are most commonly used are early admission to Kindergarten, grade-skipping, subject or partial acceleration, curriculum compacting, dual enrollment courses, and AP or IB classes.

Each of these types of acceleration may create obstacles which prevent student access. Early admission to Kindergarten means that a student begins school prior to the age limit set by the district. This requires permission from district administrators, which can sometimes be problematic. Grade-skipping involves moving ahead of peers by one or more grade levels. This may happen at any time during the school year, although teachers may be reluctant to disrupt a student's routine mid-year. Subject or partial acceleration involves being moved ahead of a student's grade level in one or more subjects, but not all of them. This does not usually pose much of a problem in secondary schools, however scheduling conflicts between grade level teachers can be a significant barrier in elementary classrooms. Curriculum compacting requires teachers to analyze both student readiness and the content standards in order to decide which parts of the curriculum to combine and when to move a student forward. Many teachers may not have the necessary skills or credentials to teach higher levels of content. For instance, a third grade teacher may not be certified or able to teach sixth grade math. Dual enrollment, AP, and IB courses are classes in which a student receives both credit from his or her high school as well as college credit. A barrier to student access is the lack of these course offerings in many high schools, especially rural ones. Also, some colleges and universities do not accept AP and IB

credits, and the colleges that do accept them often have different passing score requirements (Hertberg-Davis et al., 2006; Southern & Jones, 2015)

When students are granted access to acceleration, the literature reveals that there are positive effects on academic achievement. Kretschmann, et al. (2014) compared the academic achievement of elementary school students who skipped a grade with that of their older classmates from the new grade level. After matching the subjects based on family and cultural background, academic capability, age of school enrollment, and economic status, they found that the accelerated students performed at least as well in the new grade level as their nonaccelerated peers. No negative effects were noted, and the skipped students were able to keep up in the new grade level despite having missed a year of instruction.

The positive effects of acceleration on academic achievement are not just applicable to elementary school students. Recent studies have shown that there are academic benefits for accelerated students from all programmatic levels. Rogers (2015) contributed a research synthesis chapter to the national report, *A Nation Empowered: Evidence Trumps the Excuses Holding Back America's Brightest Students*. The data on the effects of a variety of academic acceleration practices were collected and analyzed from the last several decades. The results of the analysis reveal that both subject acceleration and grade skipping have moderate positive effects across all grade levels. The effects were stronger for elementary and high school students than they were for middle school students.

In an effort to discover the effects of acceleration on adults, Park, et al. (2013) explored the effects of skipping a grade on adult productivity in fields related to science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM). The researchers examined whether participants were more likely to achieve advanced degrees in STEM areas of study, whether they were likely to earn

these degrees earlier than their nonaccelerated peers, and whether they were more prolific in their career achievements. Participants were mathematically advanced students who were identified as gifted at or before the age of 13. The results of the study confirmed previous findings that acceleration is academically beneficial. These adults earned more advanced STEM degrees at an earlier age than did their equally bright peers who did not skip a grade. They also earned more honors and had more notable accomplishments in their careers than their nonaccelerated peers.

Acceleration does not only have positive effects on academic achievement. It also has positive social and emotional effects. Hoogeveen, et al. (2012) investigated the social-emotional characteristics of gifted students who were accelerated compared to those who were not accelerated. Participants were 203 individuals aged 4 to 27 years. There were 136 boys, 94 of whom were accelerated and 67 girls, 54 of whom had been accelerated. Subjects answered questions about behavior and personality characteristics, social interactions, and background. Although the researchers noted an inherent limitation in the study due to possible errors in self-reporting, the results were deemed to be statistically valid. No negative effects were reported on students' social-emotional adjustment when compared to nonaccelerated peers. The accelerated students were less likely to avoid risk, less likely to be affected by environmental situations, and more likely to be socially well-adjusted. Additionally, this study found that even skipping multiple grades did not negatively affect students' social or emotional well-being.

When investigating the long-term effects of academic acceleration on students who were profoundly gifted, Gross (2006) obtained similar results and verified that not only does acceleration prove beneficial to these students, but also that the lack of acceleration opportunities can actually cause harm. A 20-year longitudinal study of 60 students with IQs of 160 and above

revealed that participants who did not have the option of acceleration were deeply unsatisfied. Reports of students who had been reading fluently well before school entrance but were still forced to participate in reading readiness exercises in the primary grades were among the examples of the discrepancy between student needs and offered services. Many of the students who were not accelerated became underachievers, and they struggled to complete their education because of disengagement and lack of challenge. These exceptionally gifted students also reported difficulty finding classmates with whom to form friendships. As a result, several struggled to form and maintain close relationships as adults. Six of these sought treatment for depression. On the contrary, the students who were accelerated were much more satisfied with their educational experience, and had an easier time finding classmates with common interests and abilities. The students who were radically accelerated were the most satisfied and socially well-adjusted, while the students who were only permitted to skip one grade reported the least satisfaction and expressed regret that they were not allowed to accelerate further.

Although the majority of the research has found that acceleration confers only positive effects, one study by Preckel, et al. (2010) found that some types of acceleration could lead to a drop in academic self-concept. Participants in this study were 186 ninth grade students in eight math classes, four of which were homogeneously grouped gifted classes. Data were collected at three points during the year via self-reporting instruments. Although the researchers noted the limitation of self-reporting, they also found the results to be statistically valid. The results of this study revealed that the students who were placed in homogeneously grouped classes experienced a decrease in their academic self-concept. It was speculated that this drop may have been caused by interacting with peers of similar ability for the first time and that students' self-concept may have been artificially inflated prior to this change. Regardless of the cause, the decrease was

most substantial during the first 10 weeks of school and no further decrease occurred after that time. Researchers concluded that the negative effects of a temporary decrease in self-concept need to be weighed against the positive benefits of a more appropriate long-term challenge when making decisions about acceleration options for students who are gifted.

Underutilization of Acceleration

Although the literature reveals both positive academic and social-emotional effects when gifted students are accelerated, many students still do not receive the benefit of these services. Callahan, et al. (2014) completed a report for The National Center on the Gifted and Talented in which 1,566 school districts (765 elementary, 486 middle, and 315 high school) across the country responded to a survey regarding programming, policies, funding, and teacher qualifications. Of the responding districts, only 1.7% of elementary districts provided subject acceleration while only 0.2% provided opportunities for students to accelerate one whole grade or more. On the middle school level, 2.4% provided subject acceleration, and 0.3% allowed for acceleration by grade. High school acceleration opportunities were primarily provided through AP, IB, and dual enrollment courses. Of the high school districts surveyed, 6.6% offered dual enrollment courses, 2.2% offered IB courses, and 40.4% offered AP courses. In addition to these course offerings, 25.7% of high school districts and 28.2% of middle school districts offered honors classes, while 7.4% of high school districts and 36.1% of middle school districts provided special homogeneously grouped classes for gifted students. There was no mention of grade skipping in the high school acceleration data, possibly because students who were eligible would have already been advanced one grade or more prior to entering high school.

In an attempt to discover what causes this lack of services, Siegle, et al. (2013) completed a study to measure educators' attitudes toward acceleration. They surveyed 152 teachers who

were attending a conference on providing enrichment to gifted students. Participants responded from 30 states in the United States and from 11 locations outside the country. The survey asked participants to respond to items regarding concerns about accelerated students, opinions about the value of acceleration as a service option, and statements regarding types of acceleration.

Most respondents (80%) indicated beliefs that acceleration would benefit students' grade point averages. A majority (78%) did not think that students who were accelerated would be harmed by missing instruction or the opportunity to practice important skills. These educators were not concerned that students would find it difficult to learn higher level content (91%) or to obtain entrance to college (89%). Rather, they were of the opinion that acceleration increased the students' opportunities to get into their desired colleges or universities (54%). The responses to these items reflect that teacher beliefs in this study align with current research regarding the positive effects of acceleration on academic achievement.

Based on past studies, the researchers expected that teachers would be concerned that acceleration would have negative effects on students' social-emotional development. However, when asked to respond to statements regarding emotional concerns, 33% of teachers were undecided about whether accelerated students were happy, and 36% were undecided about students' emotional adjustment. Fewer than half of the respondents felt that accelerated students were arrogant, and 85% of participants did not believe that students who were accelerated had lower self-esteem. In response to social concerns, more than half of the educators disagreed or were undecided about whether accelerated students had well-adjusted social lives. A little less than half (48%) felt that they were lonelier than nonaccelerated students while 43% of teachers worried about other students resenting those who were accelerated.

The researchers were encouraged by these results. They indicated that teacher responses were more aligned to current research regarding the social-emotional development of accelerated students than they had been in past studies, but noted that changing attitudes were not being reflected by changing behavior. One reason that educators in this study cited for not recommending acceleration was a belief that their recommendation would be met by resistance from administrators, parents, or other educators. The authors specified a need for more research documenting the social and emotional benefits of acceleration along with more education for teachers and administrators.

In a similar study, Rambo and McCoach (2012) developed a survey to measure teacher attitudes toward subject-specific celebration (TATSSA). They sent a pilot survey to 1,000 elementary and secondary teachers in a southwestern suburban school district. Participants taught a variety of subjects. Several items were changed in response to recommendations from the 445 respondents to the pilot study. The second phase of the study included the district from the pilot phase in addition to two other school districts. This time, 337 responses were received, 45% of which were from elementary teachers, 22% of which were from middle school teachers, and 17% of which were from high school teachers. A total of 16% of respondents did not indicate a grade level.

The results indicated that, although teachers acknowledged the positive effects of acceleration, they tended to place more weight on the possible negative effects. This led many teachers to refrain from recommending acceleration. It appeared that teachers who were more educated about acceleration were more likely to disagree with the objections and to recommend that their students receive these services. Additionally, the higher the teacher rated his or her self-efficacy (TSE) on acceleration, the more likely he or she was to recommend it. The more

training that a teacher had in gifted education and the more experience a teacher had working with gifted students, the higher his or her TSE toward recommending acceleration. Another factor that appeared to weigh heavily on teacher likelihood to recommend was perceived support from administrators. Therefore, the recommendations from these researchers mimicked those from the previous study. More teacher and administrator training on the benefits and practices of acceleration would correct misconceptions and increase teachers' likelihood to recommend acceleration for their students.

Conclusion

Recent research documents the positive effects of acceleration on academic achievement (Gross, 2006; Hoogeveen et al., 2012; Kretschmann et al., 2014; Park et al., 2013; Preckel et al., 2010; Rogers, 2015). However, many gifted students are still not being offered acceleration as a service option (Callahan et al., 2014; Missett et al., 2014).

While the research on teacher attitudes toward acceleration is encouraging, it is also limited. It indicates that teachers' attitudes toward acceleration are starting to reflect current research about the academic benefits, but many educators still fail to recommend it due to concerns about the possible negative effects on students' social and emotional development (Siegle et al., 2013). Also, when making decisions about acceleration, teachers appear to place more weight on possible negative outcomes than on the potential benefits.

Training on gifted education methods and experience working with gifted students tends to increase teacher self-efficacy toward recommending acceleration (Rambo & McCoach, 2012). Additionally, perceived support from administrators and others appears to have a significant influence on an educator's likelihood to recommend these services. Given the limited number of studies available and the indications that teachers make decisions based on expectations of

administrative and collegial support, further research is needed to investigate the perceptions held by teachers and administrators on the effectiveness of academic acceleration as a service option for students who are gifted.

Chapter Three: Procedures and Methods

Research Question

What perceptions are held by public school teachers regarding the effectiveness of using academic acceleration as a service option for educating students who are identified as gifted?

Operational Definitions

1. Academic acceleration will be defined as moving a student through a curriculum ahead of his or her age-level peers (Southern & Jones, 2015).
2. Perceptions will be defined as the beliefs and understandings of an individual given his or her education and experiences.

Setting and Participants

The target population for this study was all 701 teachers in a West Virginia school district. According to Mertler (2015), a minimum sample size for survey research is 350 participants, and a reasonable expected response rate is approximately 50%. Therefore, the entire population was surveyed in hopes of securing the minimum number of responses. The subjects were teachers in a suburban school district near one of the largest cities in the state. It served a total of 9,907 students, 95% of which were white and 5% of which were African-American, Hispanic, Asian, and Native American. Of these students, 5,049 were male and 4,858 were female. There were 1,603 students who received special education services, and 97.10% of classes were taught by highly qualified teachers. These teachers instructed an average class size of 19.1 students, and the district had a graduation rate of 90.21% (West Virginia Department of Education, 2015). Since the entire target population was surveyed, no sampling method was used.

Procedures

Once the study was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and permission was obtained from the administrative offices of the school district (see Appendix A), an email with an informed consent form (see Appendix B) and a link to the anonymous online survey (see Appendix C) was sent to the administrative representative who had previously agreed to act as site supervisor. The supervisor forwarded the email to all of the teachers in the district via a list-serve. The first page of the survey contained an anonymous survey consent form where invitees were instructed that completion of the survey indicated consent to use their responses in the study. After two weeks, only 94 responses had been received, so the email and link were resent to remind those who may have intended to complete the survey but did not. This was intended to increase the response rate and to help ensure that the results were generalizable to the population. Ten days after the second solicitation, when the number of responses had remained at 187 for two days, the survey was closed and the data were analyzed.

Instruments

After reviewing a 31-item survey developed by Karen E. Rambo and D. Betsy McCoach (2012) called Teacher Attitudes Toward Subject-Specific Acceleration (TATSSA), a 20-item survey was developed. The new survey called Teachers' Perceptions of Academic Acceleration (TPAA) was loosely based on the structure of the TATSSA in that it focused on academic concerns, social-emotional concerns, perceived administrative support, and likelihood of recommending acceleration. Five of the 20 questions contained similar wording to questions from the TATSSA. However, the TPAA focused on all forms of academic acceleration rather than just subject-specific acceleration.

The TPAA contained four demographic questions about years and type of teaching experience, gender, and level of education. These were a combination of multiple choice and constructed response. Following this section were 12 Likert-style questions where participants were presented with a four-point scale from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. Five of these items focused on perceived academic concerns and benefits related to acceleration. Three focused on social concerns and benefits, and four focused on perceived support. The final four questions were open-ended constructed responses which were designed to elicit elaboration on some of the previous Likert-style items.

Threats to Validity

One threat to the validity of the study is that teachers were self-reporting. It is possible that participants did not take time to read the questions closely or to think about their answers which would have caused their responses not to truly reflect their perceptions. Also, there is a possibility that the wording of the questions led participants to respond in a particular way.

Another threat to the validity of the study was the possibility of one participant giving more than one response, which would have skewed the results. Although the survey settings were set up to allow only one response per user, the survey was also designed to be completely anonymous. This turned off the controls which would have allowed tracking of email or IP addresses, so it opened up the possibility that one user may have created multiple responses by following the link from different email addresses and computers. Without the ability to inspect the source of each response, it was impossible to detect if this had occurred. However, given the number of demands on a teacher's time, it is more likely that teachers rushed their responses due to time constraints rather than taking the time to complete the survey multiple times from different locations.

Chapter Four: Results

The purpose of this study was to determine the perceptions of teachers regarding the benefits of academic acceleration as a service option for students who are identified as gifted. The initial email was sent out via a list-serve to 701 teachers in Putnam County Schools. The goal was to receive a response rate of 50%. However, after two weeks, only 94 (13%) responses had been received. The email was resent, and the original plan was to wait two more weeks. However, after 10 days, the number of responses had declined steadily and had remained static for two days, so the survey was closed and data were analyzed. A total number of 187 (27%) responses were received. During data analysis, it was determined that 12 respondents had provided demographic information but had failed to answer any of the survey questions pertaining to acceleration. The information for those 12 respondents was deleted, which resulted in a final 25% (175) response rate. The low return rate limits the generalizability of this study.

Demographic Information

Of the 175 respondents, 30 (17%) were male and 143 (82%) were female. Two respondents (1%) declined to answer. The level of experience was fairly evenly distributed with 28 (16%) of respondents having between zero and five years of experience, 41 (23%) having between six and ten years of experience, 34 (19%) having between 11 and 15 years of experience, 25 (14%) having between 16 and 20 years of experience, and 47 (28%) having 21 or more years of experience. The level of education was not evenly distributed as 13 (7%) of the respondents had a Bachelor's Degree, 47 (28%) had a Bachelor's +15, 11 (6%) had a Master's Degree, 26 (16%) had a Master's +15, 22 (13%) had a Master's +30, and 52 (30%) had a Master's +45. In an open-ended question that asked respondents to list current and past teaching experience including subjects and grade levels, eight participants declined to answer. Out of the

167 remaining participants, 27 (16%) had experience teaching elementary grade levels, 64 (38%) had experience teaching secondary grade levels, 15 (10%) had experience teaching special education classes, 9 (5%) had experience teaching fine arts classes, and 52 (31%) had a combination of experience, including either both primary and secondary grade levels or both general and special education classes.

Perceptions of the Effects of Acceleration on Academic Achievement

Questions 5 and 11 addressed the effects of acceleration on academic achievement.

There were 173 total responses (see Table 1) to number 5 and 165 total responses to number 11. Regarding the likeliness of acceleration causing a student to miss out on important knowledge or skills, 8% of respondents strongly disagreed, 56% of respondents disagreed, 32% of respondents agreed, and 4% of respondents strongly agreed that acceleration would cause gaps in a students' knowledge. Regarding the likeliness of an accelerated student to struggle with advanced material, 5% of respondents strongly disagreed, 88% of respondents disagreed, 7% of respondents agreed, and 0% of respondents strongly agreed that acceleration may cause academic struggle.

Table 1

Percentage of Item Responses by Category

Academic Achievement		N	SD	D	A	SA
			N %	N %	N %	N %
Q5	Academic Acceleration in one or more subjects is likely to cause a gifted student to miss out on important knowledge and skills	173	14 8%	97 56%	55 32%	7 4%
Q11	A gifted student who accelerates in one or more subjects is likely to struggle with the advanced material.	165	8 5%	145 88%	12 7%	0 0%

Perceptions of the Effects of Acceleration on Engagement

The effects of acceleration on student engagement were addressed by Questions 7, 8, and 14. There were 169 total responses (see Table 2) to Question 7, 163 responses to number 8, and

158 responses to number 14. Three responses to number 8 indicated more than one answer choice and were discarded. 73% of respondents agreed and 8% strongly agreed that students who accelerated were more likely to be engaged and to continue to excel academically while 19% disagreed and 0% strongly disagreed with that statement. 74% disagreed and 7% strongly disagreed that gifted students who accelerated would be more likely to disengage and experience academic burnout while 19% agreed and 0% strongly agreed. 53% of participants agreed that gifted students who were not allowed to accelerate were more likely to disengage and to experience burnout while 29% disagreed and 2% strongly disagreed that lack of acceleration may lead to disengagement.

Table 2*Percentage of Item Responses by Category*

Engagement		N	SD	D	A	SA
			N %	N %	N %	N %
Q7	Gifted students who accelerate in one or more subjects will be more engaged with the material and will continue to excel academically.	169	1 0%	32 19%	123 73%	13 8%
Q8	Gifted students who are not allowed to accelerate are more likely to become disengaged with the material and to experience academic burnout.	163	3 2%	47 29%	86 53%	27 16%
Q14	Gifted students who accelerate in one or more subjects are more likely to become disengaged with the material and may experience academic burnout.	158	11 7%	117 74%	30 19%	0 0%

Perceptions of the Effects of Acceleration on Social/Emotional Development

The effects of acceleration on social/emotional development were addressed by Questions 6, 10, and 12. There were 171 responses (see Table 3) to number 6, 161 to Question 10, and 163 to number 12. One response each to Questions 10 and 12 was discarded for having multiple answers. More respondents disagreed (52%) or strongly disagreed (8%) that gifted students who accelerated would struggle socially than respondents who agreed (36%) or strongly agreed (4%). However, 60% of respondents disagreed and 3% strongly disagreed that

accelerated students would thrive socially due to having more in common with older students while only 30% agreed and 1% strongly agreed. Additionally, only 16% of participants agreed and 1% strongly agreed that not allowing acceleration could lead to social struggle while 77% disagreed and 6% strongly disagreed that not accelerating may cause gifted students to have trouble making and keeping friends due to lack of common interests with their same-age peers.

Table 3*Percentage of Item Responses by Category*

Social/Emotional Development		N	SD	D	A	SA
			N %	N %	N %	N %
Q6	Gifted students who accelerate in one or more subjects are likely to struggle socially and will have trouble making friends due to not being accepted by the older students.	171	14 8%	18 52%	62 36%	7 4%
Q10	Gifted students who accelerate in one or more subjects are likely to thrive socially and will have an easier time making friends with older students due to an increase in common interests and understanding.	161	5 3%	97 60%	57 36%	2 1%
Q12	Gifted students who are not allowed to accelerate will struggle socially and will have a hard time making friends with their same-age peers due to a lack of common interests and understanding.	163	10 6%	125 77%	26 16%	2 1%

Likeliness to Recommend Acceleration

The likeliness to recommend acceleration was addressed by Question 9 (see Table 4). Two responses were discarded for containing multiple answers. 77% of respondents agreed and 13% strongly agreed that they would recommend acceleration for one of their gifted students if certain criteria were met while only 9% disagree and 1% strongly disagreed. Question 17 was an open-ended question that further developed this topic by asking respondents about the circumstances that would need to be in place before they would recommend acceleration in one or more subjects. There were 119 total responses, some of which did not directly address the question and some of

which mentioned more than one criteria. 63 responses mentioned that students would need to exhibit high academic achievement in the form of good grades and/or achievement test scores while 30 of the responses discussed the importance of motivation, organization, good behavior, and strong social skills. There were 7 mentions of the need for parental support in order for acceleration to be successful, and 23 respondents stated that they would recommend acceleration for students who showed disengagement or boredom with grade-level material.

Table 4*Percentage of Item Responses by Category*

Likelihood to Recommend		N	SD	D	A	SA
			N %	N %	N %	N %
Q9	If certain criteria were met, I would recommend acceleration in one or more subjects as a service option for one of my gifted students.	165	2 1%	15 9%	127 77%	21 13%

Perceptions of Administrative Support for Acceleration

Questions 13, 15, and 16 addressed the perception of administrative support for acceleration. There were 159 responses (see Table 5) each for questions 13 and 16, and 156 participants responded to number 15. Two responses for Question 13, six responses for Question 15, and two responses for Question 16 were discarded due to multiple answers. When directly queried, 58% agreed and 4% strongly agreed that their school and county administrators would be supportive if they recommended acceleration while only 34% disagreed and 4% strongly disagreed. However, when asked if there were adequate supports in place to help implement acceleration, 55% disagreed and 14% strongly disagreed while only 30% agreed and 1% strongly agreed. Additionally, 59% disagreed and 11% strongly disagreed that they were properly trained to meet the academic needs of gifted students while 29% agreed and 1% strongly agreed that they had received adequate training.

Table 5*Percentage of Item Responses by Category*

Administrative Support		N	SD	D	A	SA
			N %	N %	N %	N %
Q13	The school and county administration would be supportive if I recommended acceleration in one or more subjects as a service option for one of my gifted students.	159	7 4%	54 34%	92 58%	6 4%
Q15	There are adequate supports in place to help teachers and students implement academic acceleration in one or more subjects.	156	22 14%	86 55%	46 30%	2 1%
Q16	Teachers are properly trained to recognize and meet the academic needs of gifted students.	159	18 11%	93 59%	46 29%	2 1%

To further develop these topics, Question 18 asked respondents how the support from school and county administrators would influence their decision to recommend acceleration, and Question 19 asked what kind of training and support would be needed for respondents to feel comfortable recognizing and meeting the needs of gifted students. Of the 106 total responses to number 18, several didn't address the question and made statements like, "We don't accelerate," and "Some schools encourage students traveling to other classrooms for acceleration and some don't." 28 of the respondents who addressed the question indicated that administrative support would heavily influence their decision to accelerate. They discussed the logistics of transporting students to different locations, adjusting schedules, and providing curricular or staff support to teachers as necessities in making acceleration successful for a student. These participants also mentioned the need for consistent assessments and expectations among the different teachers and administrators that an accelerated student may have. 10 respondents indicated that administrative support would not affect their decision to recommend acceleration if they felt that it was in the best interest of their student.

There were 110 total responses to number 19, and the majority (43) mentioned that a professional development session in the form of a class, workshop, or webinar would be helpful to better prepare them to recognize and meet the needs of their gifted students. 12 respondents

indicated a need for curricular materials and quickly accessible resources since they indicated that the majority of their time was spent trying to meet the needs of struggling students and felt that their advanced/gifted students were getting “left behind.” Additionally, 12 respondents expressed frustration with expectations of differentiation for individual needs in a heterogeneous general classroom. These participants requested training, classes, and in one case, an actual person to show them how to differentiate rather than just telling them how to do it and expecting that it would work as described. Several other respondents expressed frustration at the lack of available staff to successfully implement differentiation for all learners, including gifted students. These participants requested additional teachers as well as programs that might be implemented to homogeneously group students and allow them to advance at their own pace rather than trying to meet the array of academic and behavioral needs that are present in heterogeneous classrooms.

Additional Information

The final open-ended question asked respondents if there was anything else they would like to share regarding academic acceleration. 16 participants made comments about how gifted students' needs are not being met by the current system. One participant said, “We are doing those children a disservice by not offering acceleration in all subjects. Students that are not challenged lose interest in learning.” Another pointed out that students who need remediation are offered those services “in-house” but gifted learners are not and stated, “I feel this is an unfair inequality!” Additionally, respondents told anecdotal stories of students who thrived because of acceleration or who languished when accelerated while a few decried the fact that gifted programs and/or advanced classes are often scheduled at the same time as music and art, which deprives gifted students of a well-rounded education or forces them to choose between academic advancement and artistic self-fulfillment. Another theme that emerged from 10

participants was that it is important to individualize acceleration programs and not to offer “cookie-cutter” programs for gifted students since they all have different needs and are not necessarily gifted in every subject. 17 participants also pointed out that students’ maturity levels and social skills must be considered when making decisions to accelerate, and 18 respondents discussed the logistical issues with staffing, transportation, and possibly switching schools that can frequently derail attempts to accelerate. For example, a student who is accelerated in one or more subjects in elementary school, but does not skip an entire grade, runs into a roadblock when he or she needs sixth grade math or reading, but can’t travel to the middle school for part of the day.

Chapter Five: Discussion

The goal of this study was to determine the perceptions held by teachers regarding the benefits of academic acceleration as a service option for students who are identified as gifted. All 701 teachers in a suburban West Virginia school district were surveyed in hopes of receiving at least a 50% response rate. 187 total responses were received, and 12 were discarded due to containing only demographic information. The remaining 175 responses constituted a 25% response rate.

Interpretation and Implication of Results

The perceptions of the teachers in this study regarding the benefits of acceleration, on academic achievement and engagement, seemed to be in line with current research. 93% of teachers disagreed or strongly disagreed that accelerated students would struggle with advanced material, and 64% disagreed or strongly disagreed that acceleration would cause gaps in students' knowledge and skills. Additionally, 81% of teachers agreed that acceleration would *increase* engagement. 78% of respondents indicated disagreement that acceleration could lead to *disengagement* while 69% agreed that *not* accelerating when needed could cause disengagement and academic burnout.

There were more mixed results regarding the perceptions of the effects of acceleration on social/emotional development. In addition to the responses to the Likert-style questions, some of the open-ended responses indicated concern and sometimes frustration with the social skills of gifted students. One teacher mentioned that a criteria for identifying gifted students might be that they were “constantly challenging the teacher/material saying the teacher/material is wrong” and “being rude to the rest of the class (lords it over the class).” A few others complained about lack of motivation and “gifted students whose work ethic did not exist.” Regarding whether

accelerated students would struggle socially due to not being accepted by the older students, 60% disagreed that it would be a problem. However, 63% contradicted that by disagreeing that accelerated students would thrive socially, and an even larger number (83%) disagreed that students who were not allowed to accelerate would struggle socially. These results indicate that the teachers in this survey may benefit from further education regarding the social/emotional needs of gifted students since the literature indicated many social benefits for gifted students who accelerate and possible social harm for those who are not allowed to do so. These teachers appeared to be unaware that the benefits include having an easier time making and keeping friends when accelerated due to having more in common with older students than with their same-age peers. Additionally, they appeared to not understand that for profoundly gifted students, lack of acceleration can cause students to have both short and long-term trouble forming and maintaining relationships since these students find it very difficult to identify with others in their age group (Gross, 2006).

Regarding likeliness to accelerate, the responses were positive in that 90% of respondents indicated that they would recommend acceleration if certain criteria were met. However, when queried as to what needed to be in place for that to happen, teachers indicated intense frustration with the current classroom structure and availability of resources to help them differentiate enough to meet the needs of their gifted learners as well as their struggling learners. The majority of teachers indicated a desire to learn more about gifted education and expressed concern that their gifted learners were being “left behind” by the current system. While a majority of respondents (62%) felt that their school and county administrators would be supportive if they recommended acceleration, 69% felt that there were not adequate supports in place to help them implement acceleration, and 70% disagreed that teachers are properly trained

to recognize and meet the needs of their gifted students. There were a few anecdotal stories of gifted children languishing in school because there were not adequate supports in place to meet their needs. One teacher wrote, "My son did the same math book and same problems 3 years in a row because he was not allowed to go on. He was able to cope with the ridiculousness of the situation...as he graduated at the top of his class and is a federal judge today." However, another wrote about her daughter's disengagement and underachievement due to lack of appropriate support and limited availability of the arts classes that motivated her to excel.

Limitations

The low return rate (25%) limited the generalizability of this study to the larger population. Although the survey was disseminated in the late winter, weather did not appear to have been a factor in the return rate. There were indications that teachers were rushed when completing responses, so lack of time appeared to have been a problem. For example, 12 respondents took the time to answer the demographic questions, but then failed to complete any of the content questions. Additionally, a trend emerged in that the later questions received fewer responses than the earlier ones which may indicate that respondents either got tired of answering or were feeling rushed and started skipping questions toward the end.

Another limitation was the fact that the researcher neglected to check the box that would limit respondents to one answer choice per question. This led to a total of 17 invalid responses that negatively impacted seven different questions. As it was impossible to tell which answer the participants intended to be the final one and the survey was anonymous, there was no alternative except to discard those answers. It would not be productive to speculate how that may have affected the results.

A final limitation was that the majority of respondents (65%) indicated having a Master's Degree or higher. This is possibly attributable to the fact that those with a Master's Degree had completed similar research projects and were more likely to "pay forward" the help they received by taking the time to do this survey. The fact that those with Bachelor's Degrees were in the minority, however, skewed the sample in favor of those with more education and could have given an inaccurate picture of the perceptions of the larger population.

Further Research

This researcher found the results of this survey very interesting, and briefly investigated connections between demographic information and perceptions of acceleration. For example, the type of teaching experience indicated was cross-tabulated with questions related to academic achievement, but no interesting anomalies emerged. The patterns of responses were very similar between teachers with primarily elementary, secondary, special education, fine arts, and a combination of experience. Time constraints limited further exploration, but additional research to explore how levels of education, years and type of experience, and even gender may affect teachers' perceptions of acceleration would be intriguing. Additionally, a similar survey with a larger sample size would be useful to help determine whether these results accurately represented the perceptions held by the larger population.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the teachers in this survey appeared to be well-informed about the academic benefits of acceleration, but the majority were misinformed about the social-emotional benefits. The teachers surveyed appeared to be very concerned with meeting the needs of all of their students, including their gifted learners, and indicated that they would be open to recommending academic acceleration if certain criteria were met. When describing the

conditions that would need to be in place for acceleration to be successful, many teachers indicated frustration with the lack of supports that are in place to meet the needs of diverse learners. Additionally, the majority of teachers did not feel they were properly trained to recognize and meet the needs of gifted students. Requests for additional training, materials, more homogeneous class structures, and/or additional staff dominated the discussion about what teachers would need in order to feel confident in meeting the needs of their gifted learners. Although the majority of teachers indicated that their administrators would support their recommendations for acceleration, they also discussed daunting logistics including schedule conflicts and transportation issues among the reasons why acceleration is not recommended more often or is abandoned after having been started. Due to the limitations of this study, further research is needed to determine if the perceptions indicated by this survey are consistent with those of the larger population.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Site Approval Letter

Putnam County Schools
77 Courthouse Drive
Winfield, WV 25213

November 30, 2015

This letter is to document that Christy Schwartz has permission to conduct a research study at Putnam County Schools, in Winfield, WV once Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval has been obtained. I understand that this study involves distribution of an online survey. I also understand that this project is part of the course requirements for CISP 615 at Marshall University. The instructor for this course is Dr. Lori Howard.

I will act as the on-site supervisor and can be contacted by phone at 304-586-0500 ext. 1110 or by email at dfcross@k12.wv.us.

Signed,

Douglas Cross, Ed. S.
Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum and Instruction

Appendix B

Informed Consent Email

Marshall University**Anonymous Survey Consent**

Marshall University IRB

Approved on:	2/10/16
Expires on:	2/10/17
Study number:	838053

You are invited to participate in a research project entitled Teachers' Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Academic Acceleration designed to analyze the perceptions of teachers regarding the effectiveness of using academic acceleration as a service option for students who are gifted. The study is being conducted by Dr. Lori Howard and Christy Schwartz from Marshall University and has been approved by the Marshall University Institutional Review Board (IRB). This research is being conducted as part of the class requirements for Christy Schwartz.

This survey is comprised of twenty questions which will take approximately fifteen minutes to complete. Your replies will be anonymous, so do not type your name anywhere on the form. There are no known risks involved with this study. Participation is completely voluntary, and there will be no penalty or loss of benefits if you choose not to participate in this research study or to withdraw. If you choose not to participate, you can leave the survey site. You may choose not to answer any question by simply leaving it blank. Once you complete the survey, you may delete your browsing history for added security. Completing the on-line survey indicates your consent for use of the answers you supply. If you have any questions about the study, you may contact Dr. Lori Howard at 304-746-2076 or Christy Schwartz at 304-586-2184.

If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research participant you may contact the Marshall University Office of Research Integrity at (304) 696-4303.

By completing this survey you are also confirming that you are **18** years of age or older.

Please print this page for your records.

If you choose to participate in the study you will find the survey at <http://www.eSurveysPro.com/s/351063/tpaa>

Appendix C

TPAA Survey

Teachers' Perceptions of Academic Acceleration**Marshall University Anonymous Survey Consent**

You are invited to participate in a research project entitled Teachers' Perceptions of the Effectiveness of Academic Acceleration designed to analyze the perceptions of teachers regarding the effectiveness of using academic acceleration as a service option for students who are gifted. The study is being conducted by Dr. Lori Howard and Christy Schwartz from Marshall University and has been approved by the Marshall University Institutional Review Board (IRB). This research is being conducted as part of the class requirements for Christy Schwartz.

This survey is comprised of twenty questions which will take approximately fifteen minutes to complete. Your replies will be anonymous, so do not type your name anywhere on the form. There are no known risks involved with this study. Participation is completely voluntary, and there will be no penalty or loss of benefits if you choose not to participate in this research study or to withdraw. If you choose not to participate, you can leave the survey site. You may choose not to answer any question by simply leaving it blank. Once you complete the survey, you may delete your browsing history for added security. Completing the on-line survey indicates your consent for use of the answers you supply. If you have any questions about the study, you may contact Dr. Lori Howard at 304-746-2076 or Christy Schwartz at 304-586-2184.

If you have any questions concerning your rights as a research participant you may contact the Marshall University Office of Research Integrity at (304) 696-4303.

By completing this survey you are also confirming that you are 18 years of age or older.

Please print this page for your records.

Some questions were adapted from the Teacher Attitudes Toward Subject-Specific Acceleration (TATSSA) instrument developed by Karen E. Rambo and D. Betsy McCoach, 2012.

1. Gender

☐

Male

☐

Female

2. Years of Experience

☐

0-5

☐

6-10

☐

11-15

☐

16-20

☐

21+

3. Level of Education

☐Bachelor's
Degree☐Bachelor's
+15☐Master's
Degree☐Master's
+15☐Master's
+30☐Master's
+45☐

Doctorate

4. Please list past and current teaching positions including subjects and grade levels taught.

--

5. Academic acceleration in one or more subjects is likely to cause a gifted student to miss out on important knowledge and skills.

☐Strongly
Disagree☐

Disagree

☐

Agree

☐Strongly
Agree

6. Gifted students who accelerate in one or more subjects are likely to struggle socially and will have trouble making friends due to not being accepted by the older students.

☐

Strongly
Disagree

☐

Disagree

☐

Agree

☐

Strongly
Agree

7. Gifted students who accelerate in one or more subjects will be more engaged with the material and will continue to excel academically.

☐

Strongly
Disagree

☐

Disagree

☐

Agree

☐

Strongly
Agree

8. Gifted students who are not allowed to accelerate are more likely to become disengaged with the material and to experience academic burnout.

☐

Strongly
Disagree

☐

Disagree

☐

Agree

☐

Strongly
Agree

9. If certain criteria were met, I would recommend acceleration in one or

☐

Strongly
Disagree

☐

Disagree

☐

Agree

☐

Strongly
Agree

more subjects as a service option for one of my gifted students.

10. Gifted students who accelerate in one or more subjects are likely to thrive socially and

☐

Strongly
Disagree

☐

Disagree

☐

Agree

☐

Strongly
Agree

11. A gifted student who accelerates in one or more subjects is likely to struggle with the advanced material.

☐

Strongly
Disagree

☐

Disagree

☐

Agree

☐

Strongly
Agree

12. Gifted students who are not allowed to accelerate will struggle socially and will have a hard time making friends with their same-age peers due to a lack of common interests and understanding.

☐

Strongly
Disagree

☐

Disagree

☐

Agree

☐

Strongly
Agree

13. The school and county administration would be supportive if I recommended acceleration in one or more subjects as a service option for one of my gifted students.

☐

Strongly
Disagree

☐

Disagree

☐

Agree

☐

Strongly
Agree

14. Gifted students who accelerate in one or more subjects are more likely to become disengaged with the material and may experience academic burnout.

☐

Strongly
Disagree

☐

Disagree

☐

Agree

☐

Strongly
Agree

15. There are adequate supports in place to help teachers and students implement academic acceleration in one or more subjects.

☐

Strongly
Disagree

☐

Disagree

☐

Agree

☐

Strongly
Agree

16. Teachers are properly trained to recognize and meet the academic needs of gifted students.

☐

Strongly
Disagree

☐

Disagree

☐

Agree

☐

Strongly
Agree

17. Under what circumstances would you recommend acceleration in one or more subjects as a service option for one of your gifted students?

18. How would school and county administrative support influence your decision to recommend acceleration as a service option for one of your gifted students?

19. What kind of training and support would you need in order to feel comfortable recognizing and meeting the academic needs of gifted students?

20. What else would you like to share regarding academic acceleration?

References

Rambo, K. E., & McCoach, D. B. (2012). Teacher attitudes toward subject-specific acceleration: Instrument development and validation. *Journal for the Education of the Gifted*, 35(2), 129-152.
doi:10.1177/0162353212440591